[Mrs. Georgia Lunsford]

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Anne Winn Stevens, writer,

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“When I was three years old,” said Georgia Lunsford, “I went to work in my father's blacksmith shop. My brothers had left home and were working in Tennessee. So my sister and I took time about turning the wheel that worked the bellows. I was so small that I had to stand on a box.

“We lived then in a farm house at Haw Creek. The farm belonged to my father, but he rented it to a Negro and worked in the blacksmith shop next door. When anyone says to me today, 'Since you was brought up on a farm, Mrs. Lunsford, you must know right smart about farming,' I says to them, 'No, I was raised to be a good blacksmith.'”

Georgia Cordell, as she was known then, was born in a farm house on what is now the site of Lake James, N.C. But while she was still an infant, her family moved to Tennessee. After the death of her mother in Georgia's third year, her father settled down at Haw Creek on Buncombe County.

Georgia shows quite markedly her Irish descent. She is the black-haired, blue-eyed, rosy-cheeked Irish type, with long black eyelashes. As a young girl, she must have been 2 quite pretty. Now in the middle forties she looks somewhat jaded, though she still puts up a good appearance when “fixed up.”

“After my mother's death, my father married again,” continued Georgia. “My step-mother treated me very cruelly. As soon as I was old enough, I went to the Haw Creek School in the morning, and stayed with my father in the blacksmith shop in the afternoon.

“When I was thirteen, I decided I could do better for myself; so I run away and got work in Mrs. Israel's boarding house on Victoria Road, Asheville, In the mornings I went to Pease

School, on what is now the campus of the Asheville Normal and Teachers' College, and in the afternoons I worked at Mrs. Israel's.

“Mrs. Israel give me a room and board and a dollar a week. I thought I was rich! Her boarders was all T. B. patients, but that didn't mean a thing to me, then.”

After Georgia had worked in the boarding house several months, a teacher in the Pease School got her into the dormitory for under-privileged children, and found a place there, too, for one of Georgia's sisters. When two years later the sister died of pneumonia, Georgia was so unhappy that she left school and returned to Mrs. Israel's boarding house as a general house-worker. She now received a room, board, and 3 three dollars a week. In a succession of boarding houses, her work and pay was the same.

For three years, also, she was nurse maid in the home of Judge Frazier Glenn, Sr. When the Glenn children had whooping cough, she would be awakened at two or three o'clock in the morning by a tap at her door, to hear Judge Glenn saying: “Georgia, the children are crying for you.”

Then she would sit in the nursery with a child on each knee, and try to soothe them as she struggled to keep awake.

“Years afterward, ” she says, “When my own children had whooping cough, I remembered that experience.”

When she was still in her teens, on an evening off at the house of a girl friend Georgia met J. L. Lunsford, to whom after several months of deliberation she was married. He had been a “drinker,” but had apparently reformed and had a steady job at the time he was courting her. He also owned a home in a desirable neighborhood on Pearson Drive, Asheville. The family for whom Georgia was working at the time approved of him. All Georgia's friends considered her marriage fortunate.

But she had been married only two weeks when he went on a drunken spree, and “took to staying out nights.” The Clarkes, for whom Georgia had worked last, offered to give her back her 4 job and counseled divorce; but Georgia had been taught to consider divorce wicked. She decided to “stick it out.”

“If I had divorced him right then, ” she says, “I wouldn't be in the fix I am now.”

In the next fifteen years, Georgia had borne seven children: a daughter and six sons.

Her husband, though “getting around thirty-five dollars a week,” drank heavily, wasted his wages, and was a poor provider. But let Georgia resume her story.

“While we was living on Pearson Drive, Lunsford was getting five dollars a day working in the gas room of the Carolina Power and Light Company. But he spent most of his money on women and drink, and gave me hardly none. I had to take in washing to get along. I made the children's clothes out of their father's cast off clothing. I used to make the boys' blouses out of his shirt tails when the neck and sleeves of the shirts had wore out. I even made their socks out of the tops of his socks when the feet had wore out.

“I used to pray every night to be brave enough to leave him. But I was afraid to. He had me cowed. He had an awful temper, and he was jealous. If a man so much as looked at me, he accused me of being unfaithful to him.

“I would look ahead and plan to leave him as soon as my 5 youngest baby was two or three years old, but by that time I was pregnant again. I couldn't have stood living with him, though, if it hadn't been for the children. They were all I had to live for.

“When Lloyd, my next to the youngest, was born I was terribly ill. And when Jack, my youngest, was born I came near dying. The doctor told Lunsford I must never have another child.

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“Miss Luss, a neighbor, was a Christian Scientist. She used to try to pursuade me to join the Christian Science Church. She said as how her pa, who was sick, and mean to his family, and close with his money, was changed by Science after she had prayed for him for years. He got well, left off his cruel ways, and was good to his folks.

“I saw, too, how she was helped by Christian Science when she broke her arm. The healer just tied a rag around the break, and prayed, and read the Bible and Mrs. Eddy every day. After a while the bone really did knit all straight and clean.

“So I went to the Christian Science Church for six months, and sent the children to the Christian Science Sunday School. I did get tired, though, hearing of Mrs. Mary Baker Eddy all the time. It was 'Mrs. Mary Baker Eddy, Mrs. Mary Baker Eddy' 6 'till I was sick of her; but if Christian Science could make a better man of Lunsford I was all for it.

“But it seemed that the more I went in for Science, the worse Lunsford got. He even took to cursing Christian Science. Then I seen it was not use; so I give it up.

“How I came finally to leave Lunsford was this: One night he brought in five gallons of home brew and got dead drunk. The next morning I tried to wake him up to go to work, and the children tried. But it wasn't any use. Late in the afternoon he woke up. When he saw how late it was, and that he had lost a day's work, he blamed Bob, the next to the oldest boy, for not waking him.

“To punish Bob, he made him bring out, one by one, the fifty jars of fruit and vegetables I had canned during the summer. I had brought most of the material with my own money. Then he throwed each can offen the porch and smashed it. The smaller children, who didn't know any better, laughed, thinking it was a game.

“While he was doing this, I poured what was left of the home brew into the sink.”

“Are you all through?”

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“With that he raised his arm to strike me. Then Joe, my eldest boy, grabbed the poker from the kitchen stove and 7 tried to hit his father over the head.

“'You let my ma alone' he said, 'or I'll kill you.'

With that Lunsford pushed Joe offen the porch. It was just Providence that kep' the child from falling into the broken glass.

“By that time one of the neighbors had telephoned for the police. When Lunsford saw the neighbors had set the law on him, he ran off.

“Then it seemed to me the strength I had been praying for come all at once. It was like a great hole had opened up in a high wall, and I walked straight through it.

“I put Jack, the baby, in the goat wagon, and I tied a rope on the Jersey cow, and we set out down the street, Edith, my oldest, she was fifteen then, leading the cow, and I pulling Jack in the goat wagon, and the other five boys trudging along.

“It was eleven o'clock at night, but I started out to walk four miles to my sister's over at Bingham Heights. I wasn't funny at the time, but many a time since I have laughed to myself at the picture we must have made.

“It was bright moonlight, and there we was walking in the middle of the street, the goat wagon creeking and rattling, and the cow going clipperty-clop, over the 8 pavement.”

The next day, however, Georgia went back to Pearson Drive, where, aided and abetted by her neighbors, she set up housekeeping for herself and children.

“I seen,” she said, “that if my boys was to be brought up to be decent men, it was up to me. What ideas of life would they get from their father?”

A neighbor, Mrs. Atkinson, owned a house for rent in the neighborhood. She allowed Georgia to live in it, rent free. She and another neighbor, Mrs. Hough, canvassed their friends for contributions of out-grown clothing for Edith and the boys. Mrs. Atkinson's “rich sister up North” contributed clothing for the whole family.

The head of the Associated Charities helped Georgia find work. Georgia soon found plenty to do nursing T. B. cases and maternity cases sent to her. For this work she received from seven to ten dollars a week. The patients were for the most part on charity and paid for by a church or by the Associated Charities.

Edith, the fifteen-year old daughter, kept house and looked after the boys with the help of interested neighbors.

One morning, after having been on duty on a case all night, 9 Georgia was having her breakfast at a cafeteria when an acquaintance hailed her.

“Have you seen the morning paper, Mrs. Lunsford,” she asked.

Georgia had not seen it.

“It says as how J. L. Lunsford's house on Pearson Drive burned down last night. Be he your husband?”

Georgia's heart skipped a beat. The house she was living in was next door. But on a second thought she grew calmer. If anything had happened to the children, Mrs. Atkinson or some other of the neighbors would have telephoned.

She hastened home to find the children safe. But much to her dismay, Lunsford had moved in without a “by your leave” and was coolly helping Edith get breakfast.

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“Later, when I could get him to myself and away from the children, I sent him packing, ” Georgia said. “All he wanted was for us to support him.”

He had lost his job with the Power and Light Company, but he collected $1500 insurance on the house. Of this Georgia obtained from the court one hundred dollars, which Lunsford was ordered by the court to pay toward the support of the children.

But Georgia could not collect it. In some mysterious way 10 the man had managed to borrow the money back from the judge. With a friend he had started a trucking business, and from the profits he was to pay a monthly sum for the support of the children.

“The idea they were working on was a good one,” continued Georgia. “They was to take a truck load of apple down to Florida, sell the apples there, and bring back a truck load of oranges to be sold in Asheville. They sold the apples all right, but then they had to celebrate by going on a spree! In that way all the money was spent, and on top of it Lunsford wrecked the truck by his drunken driving.”

Georgia now had a better job. She was employed to assist in the infirmary of the Asheville School for boys, at a weekly wage of twelve and a half dollars. She rented a four room cottage not far from the school and then installed Edith and the boys.

“They shifted for themselves as best they could,” she said.

But ill fortune dogged her. Warren, the middle child, fell out of a tree, ruptured a kidney, and developed convulsions. Georgia got leave of absence from the school to nurse him. And in the midst of this calamity her husband 11 came back from Florida, penniless and jobless, and expecting her to support him.

So when she learned of a call for a woman to conduct the laundry at the Crossnore School, seventy miles away, she immediately applied.

The manager agreed to let her bring the six boys, offering her $10 a month with board and a room for all of them. This enabled her to be with her children and helped her incidentally to get rid of their father. Edith meanwhile had married.

She sold most of the furniture and rented a truck for fifteen dollars. With a load of bed-room furniture which she had been encouraged to take along, two cows, a lot of vegetables and fruits of her own canning, six boys, and a shepherd dog, she started for Crossnore. Unfortunately the truck driver lost the road.

“We arrived at Crossnore at four o'clock in the morning,” Georgia said. “The boys had piled everything into the truck for me the afternoon before. We must have looked a sight. As for the canned stuff, I don't know where it went. There was some sausage there, too, that I never found. Some of the Crossnore teachers confessed, after they knew me better, that they had found it and fried it for their own breakfasts.”

The Crossnore School for underprivileged children is situated 12 on a rocky, wooded mountain side at an altitude of some thirty five hundred feet. Although picturesque, the buildings at the time were quite crude, a lot of smoky, draughty structures built by mountain labor.

But to continue Georgia's story. She was assigned to the Little Girls' Dormitory. There she had charge of twenty little girls on the first floor. She saw that they got up and dressed themselves for a seven o'clock breakfast, did their various household chores, and got off to school on time. At odd minutes she mended their clothes. On Sunday she saw that they were bathed and dressed appropriately, brushed, and marshalled on foot in neat lines to Sunday school at the Presbyterian Church on a hillside one mile away. Rain or shine, snow or sleet, it was all the same.

The rest of the time she “ran the laundry” with the aid of shifts of high school students who should have been in study-hall. In this manner she had to handle the bedding and clothing

for two hundred students and forty or more workers and teachers as well as the supplies for the hospital.

At the time Georgia was in charge, the laundry was located in a very small room in the basement of the hospital. Pipes from the heating plant ran under the low ceiling, so that the workers had to duck under them as they walked from place to 13 place. There was no drier. In sunny weather the clothes were dried out of doors. When it rained or snowed, this had to be done within the already crowded space. The electric irons frequently went on the blink, and as the high school girls were totally inexperienced, Georgia had to do most of the ironing herself. In order to finish the week's work, she frequently stayed at her task until eleven o'clock at night.

Her health, which had seemed robust, began to fail. She collapsed from time to time under the strain, and had to come to Asheville for a month at a time for medical treatment. In addition to board and loding for herself and her children, she rarely received more than three dollars a month, so that she had to fall back on the little money she received from her furniture. Since she was not strong enough to care for both for the laundry and the twenty little girls, her room was assigned to a younger house-mother, and she was given another room then in the basement of the Teacherage.

“I was told,” she said, “that I could keep my younger boys with me there if I liked, because there was and outside entrance which the could use without disturbing the teachers. This entrance was through the furnace room next door. Since the engineer had no key to the out furnace room, he came through my room every morning to get to the furnace. The basement hall 14 and the stairs to the first floor were unlighted and dark as pitch even in the broad daylight. Being so close to the furnace room, the bedroom was impossible to keep clean.

“Joe said, 'Mother, I wouldn't stand for this; but I told him, 'In two months now you'll graduate from high school, son. Let's wait 'till then. If I complain now, I'll lose my job.'”

So Georgia continued the the laundry work until May 1935 when Joe graduated. Then she had been at Crossnore for two years. Early in May that year she and the six boys, one cow, and the shepherd dog trekked back to Asheville. There Joe and Bob found work with the Postal Telegraph Company. Joe was nineteen then, and Bob sixteen. Between them they supported the family. Both worked from seven o'clock in the morning till seven in the evening, but since Joe was the quicker, he made nine dollars a week for room and board. On this weekly income of twenty-three dollars they lived comfortably.

Later Joe got a job at Enka at twenty dollars a week. The four younger children were in school. To be sure, Joe had to work from 11 P.M. to 7 A.M., on what was commonly called the “graveyard shift,” because it brought ill-health to so many 15 of the workers. Like all beginners, Joe was on probation and worried considerably over the warnings he received telling him he was “falling below production.” But he speeded up his out-put, and finally was given a permanent position. Bob, meanwhile, continued his work with the telegraph company. For several months the family suffered no mishaps. They were united, and doing well.

“Come April, said Georgia, “the weather was bad for days. The roads were that slick, I worried all the time about the boys on their bicycles. I grew more and more afraid of an accident. One night at nine o'clock, Bob come in all wore out;

“'Ma, he said, 'I feel like I'm getting the flu. I ache all over.'

“I went to help him undress, and get to bed. As he took off his coat, he felt something hard and bunchy in an inside pocket.

“Look here, Ma', he said, pulling out a small package. 'Here's a package I forgot to deliver. This is money I've got to take to a Negro woman tonight.”

“'You aren't fit go out again tonight,' I told him.

“Warren spoke up, 'Lend me your wheel, and I'll take it.'

“Now Warren had never been well and strong since he fell out of that tree and ruptured a kidney. Once in a while he'd go into convulsions. When he did, it was usually around nine 16 or ten o'clock at night. So I said to Lloyd, he was the next to the youngest: 'You go with Warren in case he should get sick.'

“The boys set out with the package. Somehow I felt uneasy about them, knowing how slick the roads were. Ten o'clock come, and they still hadn't come home. I worried more and more.

“Then the doorbell rang.

“Bob got up and went to the door. An officer stood there leading a bicycle.

“'Son, is this yours?' he asked.

“'Yes,' said Bob.

“'Who did you lend it to?' said the officer.

“'My brothers, Lloyd and Warren,' answered Bob.

“'Son,' said the officer, 'there's been an accident, Both boys was killed.'

Georgia hardly knows what took place after that. Somebody gave her a shot with a stimulant. Neighbors came in and helped her get to the hospital where the boys had been taken. Lloyd had been killed instantly. Warren was alive but paralyzed.

The accident had happened on Clingmen Avenue. A car full of young people joy-riding, weaving from side to side of the slippery street, struck the boys, who were riding close to the 17 curb.

For six weeks, Warren remained in a plaster cast at the hospital. Then Georgia took him home, still in the cast. Little by little he got back the use of his legs, and could get around, but he will never have the full use of his hands and arms.

A lawyer took over the case for Georgia and collected five hundred dollars damages, fifty dollars of which went to pay his own fee. The remainder partially paid Warren's hospital bills.

“After that,” said Georgia, “I was so broken up that I couldn't go on living in the same house. Lloyd was the best looking and the sweetest child I had. And I was afraid for Bob to keep on working. So the next fall I sent him, Warren, and Alvin back to Crossnore, and kept only Jack with me.

“Mr. Hudgins, an acquaintance, heard and was wanting to move. 'Mrs. Lunsford,' he said, 'I know just the house for you. I'm moving out of it. It's and old farm house at the end of State Street, West Asheville. It has a four acre farm attached to it, and it rents for only five dollars a month.'”

So Georgia moved into the big two-story stucco house on the hill-top. On the outside it is quite dilapidated. The 18 stucco has fallen off the walls in great patches. Many window panes in the second story have been broken. The wide piazza and the front steps are full of holes. But, as Georgia says, it looks better on the inside. The faded green plastering is intact. Georgia has no need for the rooms on the second floor. The combined dining and living room has a good coal heater, and the kitchen range, pots, and pans are in good trim. The bedrooms down stairs are bright and cheerful. Great oak trees shelter the house in summer, and beyond the street, the row of neighboring brick bungalows and freshly painted cottages have pretty gardens.

“It's a good neighborhood,” says Georgia. “The neighbors understand how things are and are friendly. Me and Jack live here all winter. Warren, Bob, and Alvin are back at

Crossnore for the school year. Bob gets his living there by playing on the football team. Warren works in the printing office and pays his expenses that way. He is really good at setting type. Bob will graduate from high school a year from now. Then he can get a job at Enka. He'll be old enough then. He couldn't make more than seven dollars a week now, anyway. He works in filling stations in the holidays, and helps me run the farm in the summer."

Georgia herself works in the sewing room of the Eugene 19 Rankin School, and cuts out scores of garments a week. She gets thirty-six dollars a month.

"Joe isn't living with us any more," she says. "He supported the family for two years, until he was twenty-one. Then his health began to fail from his work on the 'Graveyard Shift' at Enka. His feet swelled from standing so much. He got very nervous. Dr. Brookshire said he had developed a serious kidney trouble and must give up work at Enka. He had been treated for kidney trouble before, when he was at high school at Crossnore.

"So he give up the Enka job. He lost his car, too, what he had paid two hundred dollars on, because now he couldn't keep up his payments. Besides, he couldn't see why his brothers couldn't get to work, too. He said they was depending too much on him.

"So Joe went to work with the Periddical Sales, Philadelphia. He said he had never been anywhere, and he wanted to see the world. He's been away up to Niagra and to Canada. But he went broke in Philadelphia. He says his employer cheated him out of fifteen dollars. I sent him money until he could get another job. He worked in Philadelphia awhile as orderly in a H\Jewish hospital, but he didn't like that much. So now he is working in a garage and filling station in New Jersey. But he doesn't help us none. He barely makes 20 his own expenses. When he's had his fling, I think he'll come back. His habits was pretty formed when he left here."

When the boys come home from Crossnore in May, the family take up farming on the four acres. "We raised corn and potatoes enough last summer to take me through the

winter," says Georgia. "I had a vegetable garden and put up one hundred and fifty cans of fruit and vegetables. There is an apple orchard on the farm. When the boys went back to Crossnore, I harvested the crop myself."

In the field behind the house, nine stacks of fodder bore witness to Georgia's work. There is a lean cow grazing in the field. A flock of leghorn hens occupy the chicken yard. "I sell eggs, milk and butter, sometimes," said Georgia. Jack, now ten, and a pupil in Eugene Rankin School, helps me with the cow and chickens. I love farming. Some of the old widowers around here say, "'Mrs. Lunsford, why don't you divorce Lunsford, and marry again, you'd make some man a good wife.' I tell them the only man I marry must be one who can give me a hundred acre farm.

"No, the house hasn't a bathroom and all the water that's heated must be heated on the range. But my good neighbor across the street let's me bathe at her house. And when the 21 boys come home from Crossnore, they don't feel the lack of bath tubs. This is as good as they get there. They don't like the looks of the house, though."

Clothing the three boys at Crossnore is a problem, now Joe no longer helps, and they are too big too be clothed from the contributions in the Crossnore attic. Bob has never had a whole suit of clothes. He wears slacks and sweaters like the other Crossnore boys. And how those three boys wear out shoes!

"None of the boys," Georgia declares, "have their father's temper. None of them has ever taken a drink - not even of beer. Joe is the only one who smokes. All belong to the West Asheville Presbyterian Church, even ten-year old Jack."

Georgia is proud of belonging to the West Asheville Presbyterian Church. It is a new and impressive building.

By means of the farm Georgia is able to keep a balance diet for herself and the boys, with green beans, canned fruit, milk and butter, and eggs. But when the boys come home,

how they do eat! She fed them three dozen hot buttered biscuits in one day, during the Christmas holidays.

She realizes that the boys will never fully understand the hardships through which she has lived. 22 “But,” she concludes, “I like it here. There's plenty of good air and sunshine. We aren't crowded up as we'd be in town. The house needs a lot done to it. But the landlord can't be expected to fix it up at the rent I pay. And what with insurance, and coal, and shoes for the boys, I can't afford to patch it up. But where could we find anything else as good for the same price. All I pray for is to hold my WPA job in the sewing-room until Bob graduates from high school and gets a job at Enka.”